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## Confucianism and Chinese Family Structure

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Confucianism and Chinese Family Structure

Maren Watts  
Honor's Senior Project  
1989

Confucianism has dictated the structure of the family in Chinese society. The family is the foundation of the Chinese social structure. It has been the focal point of cultural and social issues for thousands of years. Various philosophers have contributed to the value system that places family life in such high esteem. Confucius, one of the major contributors, stressed the value of order in the family and the virtue of filial piety. Based upon his teachings, the practices and relationships existent in the ideal family, came to be known as the Confucian family model. This family structure, which defines the roles and relationships proper for family members to follow, has continued to the modern day.

In modern Taiwan, the family structure has modified due to urbanization and modernization. Urban life and city dwellings have replaced agriculture as the main source of income for society. Therefore, with city living has come the modification of certain Confucian values. In ancient times, a large, multi-family dwelling was the social ideal. Today, smaller, single family homes are the norm. Also, due to revolution and modernization, government responsibilities have taken priority over family duties. Filial piety, which once meant strict obedience and reverence for one's parents, has become a social obligation to care for the elderly, rather than a personal need to care for one's parents. Confucius stressed the personal and emotional aspect of family duties. With modernization, social values have encompassed personal duties and family unity has been threatened by the lure of independence and individuality.

In modern day Taiwan or the Republic of China the three main components of the cultural value system are Confucian traditionalism; twentieth-century humanism and modern nationalism.<sup>1</sup> Due to the power of traditional Confucian family values, the social structure of Chinese society remained relatively unchanged for thousands of years. But, the effects of modernization produced dramatic changes in the traditional Confucian family structure. Confucius, did not define this family structure that society accepted as the ideal model. But, rather, as his teachings were integrated into the social values, a Confucian family model emerged.

Confucian philosophy encompasses many aspects of common life, but is targeted on the responsibility of the individual. "A pivotal aspect of Confucian traditionalism is the emphasis on social harmony- the avoidance of conflict in inter-personal relationships and in one's relationship to government and other powerful institutions."<sup>2</sup> Confucius stressed the importance of an individual cultivating virtue and then having his moral integrity manifest itself through his relationship to his family, the village, and the world. Three Confucian virtues an individual should possess were benevolence(jen), intelligence(chih) and courage(yung). Confucius saw the home as the best place for these values to be cultivated in the people. In the ideal family, the relationship of the father to his son, in particular, would be one of benevolence. The father would according to the rules of propriety, see that discipline and order governed the family. In return, the children would

follow and respect their father. Such an environment would foster the development of the virtues of filial submission, brotherliness, and loyalty.

Confucius saw filial piety and fraternal submission as the foundation of all virtuous practice.<sup>3</sup> Filial submission was the primary virtue necessary for an individual to fit into society. The basic social unit was the family, and fulfilling one's filial duties was necessary to be able to function in broader levels of society. "Confucius fully accepted the ethics of a family-centered society. The individual's primary duty was to the family, and the grades of responsibility lessened as one went beyond the family to the extended clan, to the village or community, to the state, and finally to the whole society of man, uniting it harmoniously with heaven or the cosmic order."<sup>4</sup>

To better understand family responsibilities, it is necessary to understand the situation of the family in the time of Confucius or 500 BC. China was a feudal society, divided into several small states with no acknowledged or unified government between the states. Each state had its own rulers and the 'common people' were mainly farmers, agriculture being the mainstay of society. These individual, small states were constantly at war with one another. The most powerful states conquering all the weaker states they could. Often, in a state of war, the common people struggled daily to raise food for their families.

Confucius wanted to improve the lot of the common people. He sought order in the government, and saw order in the family

as the perfect role model. Within the family, each person had a distinct role to play; the position of the father being superior to the role of the mother; the greatest emphasis being placed on the relationship between the father and the son. Men had a higher status than women, so, sons were more valued than daughters and older children were to be respected by their younger brothers and sisters. The parents were supposed to provide for and care for the children, and in return the children were to do what they could to help in the monetary support of the family. Children were also to obey and follow their parents. Contrary to Western thought, in China, children were not valued as individuals who would pursue their own goals and create their own identity, but were valued because they would do things for the benefit of the family as a whole. Children, especially sons, would help with the farm labor, have sons who would carry on the family name, and would care for their parents in their old age and even after death.<sup>5</sup> With agriculture as their livelihood, the family needed children who could help with the farm labor, not more mouths to feed. Recognizing that ancestor worship was practiced at this time, an individual wanting to be remembered after death, must have children that could attend to the family rituals. Sons, being able to carry on the family name, were thus more valuable than daughters who would take upon them a new family name when married.

The Confucian family model was of a large, extended family living together. The ideal was to have five generations under one roof, or what is called a joint family structure.

Within the extended family, there were a couple nuclear units, which consisted of a father, mother and unmarried children. Children were taught to act like adults and participate in the ways of the ancestors. Just as important as attending to the physical duties in the family, such as help with housework, etc., the emotional attitude that children had toward their parents was important. It was expected that children would fulfill their filial duties.

Filial piety was the duty and responsibility of children to obey and care for their parents. "Filial piety as understood by West Towners, means that children (especially sons) must please, follow and support their parents while the latter are alive; they must mourn and ritually serve them after their death."<sup>6</sup> So, children's filial duties extended to include their deceased ancestors. The Chinese family was a whole, everything being done for the well being of the family, both it's living and dead members. Death did not sever the family relationship but was merely an extension of it. Just as children were expected to honor and serve their parents while alive, after death this responsibility continued. Individuality was swallowed up by the various family roles one would play in their lifetime. One was always expected to be filial to their parents, and as they became parents themselves, their children were expected to be submissive to them. The family cycle was a continuous one, the role of parent and child existing simultaneously.

Confucius emphasized that for a child to be filial he must do more than just care for the needs of his parents, and

obey and follow them; he must do so with reverence. "The father is kindly toward the son and the son filial toward the father."<sup>7</sup> It was expected that the father would not be too harsh in teaching and reprimanding his son, and in return, the son would follow and obey all his father's commands. The ideal father-son relationship was not an intimate one, as much as one of mutual respect and distant reserve. The father had authority of life and death over the son, and the son was bound to care for and honor his parents. It was expected that he mourn deeply the death of his parents, and attend to family worship duties for them.<sup>8</sup>

Confucius stressed the value of a son observing the three years mourning ritual upon the death of his father. This involved forsaking material pleasures, and living a secluded life for three years to show respect for and to acknowledge the deep loss caused by the death of a parent. "At the death of his parents a man is expected to show such deep sorrow as to be barely short of suicide. At the death of his wife a man is expected to show some grief but never enough to make him forget his filial duties."<sup>9</sup> In Ancient China, parents had a stronger relationship with their children, than they had with each other. It was expected that more attention be paid to taking care of and supporting one's parents, than developing a relationship with one's spouse.

During the time of Confucius, filial piety was already an accepted standard, but his stress on the emotional responsibility involved was new. A virtuous son must have a cheerful countenance while fulfilling his filial duties.



To begin with, although Confucius clearly regarded kinship as a crucial social bond, emphasizing filial piety and other family-centered virtues, his stress was new. Merely providing material necessities for one's parents no longer could be considered a sign of filial piety. That was done by everyone; the important thing was the attitude of love that accompanied the prescribed behavior. Similarly, in other relationships, Confucius stressed the emotional and ethical content.<sup>10</sup>

The attitude shown in fulfilling one's duties was of more value than mere completion of the task. Being filial to one's parents was a personal duty, to be completed with a cheerful and reverent countenance. This Confucian attitude of dealing with matters in a personal rather than an impersonal manner and considering the man more important than the office is part of the general Chinese character which persists to this day."<sup>11</sup>

Confucius felt that the relationship existent in the well ordered family, was a model to be emulated in how a nation was run.

For centuries, Chinese rulers and Confucian scholars likened the state to the traditional Confucian family system. Proper order and hierarchy in the political realm of the state was said to be directly related to the proper order and hierarchy of the family and the family's proper moral training of obedient, filial subjects. Symbolically, the entire political system was based on the ideal Confucian family and its moral code.<sup>12</sup>

Confucius saw within the family structure, a model for good government to follow. The wise father was a model for the wise ruler and obedient children were the model for properly submissive subjects. The li, or norms of proper social

behavior, governed both the family and the state, and if adhered to, would foster social virtues; such as filial submission, brotherliness, righteousness, good faith and loyalty.<sup>13</sup>

Confucius stressed that an individual should be loyal to his family; then to the state. Confucius argued this point in a conversation with the Duke of She. "The Duke held for the state, Confucius for the family, and the two venerable gentlemen seemed to have agreed to disagree."<sup>14</sup> Confucius felt a son who fulfilled his filial duties first, would be a better citizen and ruler. He felt that loyalty to the family and loyalty to the state were not fundamentally opposed but closely related. Although, he still maintained that in the case of a father disobeying a civil law, that the upright thing to do was for the son to conceal the misconduct of his father. The son was justified in mildly reprimanding his father, but would be duty bound not to turn him in to the law.

Confucian teachings did not end with his death, but rather, as time passed, grew in acceptance and were integrated into the local culture and the social fabric of the nation. Several Confucian philosophers since that time have modified and added to the original teachings of Confucius. Each Confucianist over the years added his own views to accepted Confucian doctrine. The Confucian family ideal was therefore modified, with the passing of each new generation of Confucian philosophers. Until the late nineteenth century, the Confucian family model had been espoused as the social ideal. These principles

had been integrated into elite social circles as early as 220 AD, with Confucian family moralists writing treatises that became the accepted norm for centuries. From the Han to the Tang Dynasty, there was a gradual elaboration and codification of the Confucian family ideal. "The continuous existence of a strong, central state system (the longest in history) officially wedded to Confucianism provided these Confucian family ideals with a fairly consistent body of jural and doctrinal support, backed by state sanction, for over one thousand years."<sup>15</sup>

Due to war, revolution and modernization, the backing of Confucianism by the government was torn away. With the advent of Communism, the welding link was officially broken, and Confucian ideals were suddenly under attack. During the last years of the Ching Dynasty (1644-1911AD) and the early years of the Republic (founded in 1911 AD), a self-conscious critique of the Confucian family model emerged.<sup>16</sup> "This critique of the family system and women's position in traditional society was an integral part of the anti-Confucian, iconoclastic intellectual ferment of the May Fourth movement, and urban-based movement of the late teens and early twenties calling for national rejuvenation through cultural revolution."<sup>17</sup> The Cultural Revolution was the first national movement to challenge the authenticity of Confucian ideals.

In China, the Communist and Nationalist parties sought for control of the nation. Once the Communist government took office, the Nationalist government fled to the island

of Taiwan. In 1949, the Nationalist government established the Republic of China, or Taiwan. This new government did not oppose or condone Confucian philosophy. But, due to the entrenchment of Confucian philosophy in the values of the mainstream of society, Confucian traditions persisted. Only, the meaning of the doctrines have changed. They were modified to fit a modernized society. Over the past forty years, Taiwan was transformed from an agricultural society, to a modernized, urban society. While rural farm communities still exist, large urban cities have developed and attracted a large population. With city life, not country life being the norm, the value structure has altered somewhat to better fit the new environment. Urbanization helped bring on modernization, with it's many benefits and problems. Confucian traditions, although prevalent nationally, are most prevalent in the rural areas, where ancient traditions are more widely accepted. In larger cities, modern skepticism has led modern families to question the value of the traditional way.

Although still very similar to the Ancient Confucian family ideal, the modern Chinese family structure differs in significant ways. In particular, the role of the woman has been altered to fit the demands of a modern society, while still remaining fairly close to the stereotyped ideal. The woman's role in the traditional Confucian family was to act properly in serving her husband, to be quiet and self-possessed, shunning boisterous laughter, and thereby she earned the right to continue the husband's lineage.<sup>18</sup> Proper women's work mainly involved the service and nurturance of children and family members. The

manufacture and processing of materials supplied by men for household consumption and sometimes handicraft work or various other tasks that could be done in or near the home.<sup>19</sup>

Women's lives were secluded, often limited to association with family members and a few selected others; their lives being controlled by men and family.

The role of the woman in modern day Taiwan is expanding to include a career, but it is still commonly agreed that the wife is responsible for the care of the children and the household duties. "The traditional male-chauvinistic value orientations are still prevalent in Taiwan, even with women consisting of over one third of today's labor force."<sup>20</sup> She is still obligated to care for the household, but the size of the family she must care for is diminishing. With modernization has come a shift, from emphasis being placed on living in large joint family dwellings, to smaller nuclear unit homes. The average family size has decreased from six children per family in 1950, to only three children per family in 1980.<sup>21</sup> With increasing demands on their time, due to jobs outside the home, women have less time to devote to child rearing. "A growing sense of self-reliance seems apparent among the people. The traditional kinship support system has eroded. Particularly, the value of children has lost the traditional appeal. Children can no longer be counted on as a safeguard against poverty or loneliness."<sup>22</sup> Most people today feel that older people should not depend upon their children for their daily needs. But even so, they still feel that parents have the right to make choices for

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their children, at any age.<sup>23</sup> Also, most older people still tend to live in extended family structures, where they will have daily contact with their grown children.<sup>24</sup> So, even with their growing independence, the idea of raising children in a non-individualistic manner, still prevails in Taiwan.<sup>25</sup> During my stay in Taiwan, I observed that youth today experience more freedom from parental control, but are still expected to submit to their parents when opinions differ. A young girl, Chris, who was about fifteen years old, lived in a small rural town in the middle section of Taiwan.<sup>26</sup> She decided to abandon the Buddhist traditions of her parents and join a Western Christian church. When her parents discovered that Chris had disobeyed their orders and joined this church, they beat her severely. Once she was well, she still continued to attend this church, but without her parents knowledge. As time went on, and Chris stayed strong in this church, her parents became aware of her actions, and did not condone them, but no longer opposed them. So, it is possible today for youth to radically deviate from the course their parents choose for them, but only if they firmly and commitantly decide to do so.

In the Chinese family, children are not only responsible to their parents, but they have a duty to their ancestors. Family ties and obligations do not end with the death of a relative. An individual remains responsible to attend to their deceased relative's needs. These needs are met through ancestor worship and family rituals, such as annual celebrations for birthdays and anniversaries of deceased relatives.

The value of the life one has lived, placed upon them by society, is often determined by the extravagance to which they are remembered in family rituals. It is therefore necessary to have had male sons who will carry on the family name and attend to ritual duties. "A man or woman having achieved a measure of material security and leaving male descendants has lived a full life."<sup>27</sup> Especially for a woman, having sons to carry on the husband's lineage, is crucial to being accepted by society. Her social status will be determined by whether or not she pleases her ancestors and she can not do that, without bearing at least one son.

When an individual has family problems, or financial problems or even if their personal health is bad, it might be said that their ancestors are mad at them. The most prevalent cause for having upset ancestors is committing an unfilial act or carelessly not attending to one's filial duties. It is necessary for an individual in this case to seek the help of a local shaman to help them right the wrong as soon as possible.

So, the amount of personal freedom an individual may enjoy, is tempered by their responsibility to please their living and deceased relatives, especially when such actions are seen as selfish and independent from family needs. I knew a young woman named Julie who lived in the city of Kausyung. Kausyung is a large city of over two million people, that is located in the southern half of Taiwan. Julie supported herself by doing secretarial work at a school. Her mother lived in Taichung, a city about three hours away

by train. Her mother needed surgery soon and after surgery would require that someone care for her for several months afterwards. So, the family decided, that cost wise it would be best if Julie quit her job and moved back home to take care of her mother. Since Julie was single, and did not have her own family to provide for, they felt she was duty bound to give up her lifestyle in Kausyung and return home to assume her filial duties. Although, with modernization one can choose to ignore the opinions of one's relatives, socially, such an action often will not be accepted. So, as long as ancestor worship remains strong, family ties to a great extent, will determine the role an individual will play in life. "Though weakened compared to past practice family rituals both within the home and at the grave still remain very strong in the urban centers of Hong Kong and Taiwan where education and economic change are much more advanced."<sup>28</sup>

In order to please one's ancestors, an individual must fulfill their filial duties. The Confucian virtue of filial piety and the co-existent responsibility of parents to their children, and children to their parents has been modified by time, but still remains strong. With modernization, and social development, the values of society must of necessity change. "Social scientists seem to have accepted the notion that a change in value orientations is indispensable in the process of societal development."<sup>29</sup> Development requires the transformation of the nature of man. So, as the Confucian ideal of the large extended family has in modern



times been reduced in size, so the view of the duties implicit in filial piety has also been modified. One aspect of being filial, is the concept that an individual's first loyalty is to his family.

With the establishment of the Nationalist government, and the shift from family loyalty to state loyalty; consequently the socially accepted ideal of filial piety has changed.

A pivotal aspect of Confucian traditionalism is the emphasis on social harmony. The avoidance of conflict in interpersonal relationships to government and other powerful institutions. These values are modernized in two important respects: first, they are no longer foremost in importance, having been superseded by the value of secular nationalism; second, there has been a perceptible change from family to groups, associations, and particularly the state as the reference point and object of values. Thus, filial piety, which once meant concern for one's older kin exclusively has now come to mean respect for the aged as a class of society.<sup>30</sup>

The shift in the modern world is , therefore, moving away from personal responsibility to the family, to a stress on social duties and obligations. So, no longer is showing respect and providing for one's parents implicitly expected of an individual in order to be accepted by society.

As social issues and problems have come to the focal point of attention, family unity and responsibility has taken a back seat. With modernization bringing the promise of more personal luxuries, individual careers have become more important. So, it now becomes necessary for someone to provide for their own needs and not be totally financially dependent on their families. With financial independence,

has come social independence. One is free to do as he pleases. But, this new found freedom is not without limitations. Confucian family ties have not totally crumbled in spite of modern philosophies gaining greater acceptance.

While in Taiwan, I met a young woman, Diane, in her early twenties, who lived in Kausyubg. She wanted to move out of her parents' home and live on her own. But, her parents strongly opposed her leaving, due to financial reasons. Diane was working and could have easily supported herself, but her family couldn't afford to lose the income that she gave them. Living at home, all the money she earned was turned directly over to her parents. If she moved out, this loss of income would be devastating to the family. So, rather than fulfill her own desires, and live a life of her own, she stayed home for the sake of the family. Although Diane lived in a large modern city, the thinking of her family was too 'traditional' to allow her independence.

Though modified, Confucian family traditions still determine the role an individual will play in life. A modern day woman may enjoy a career, and more personal free time due to raising a smaller family. But, she is still responsible for the home and children. As children grow up, they are no longer responsible to attend to their parents financial needs, but their parents still reserve the right to make choices for them. The web of family duties and responsibilities expands as an individual ages. Confucian traditions are interwoven too delicately in the structure of the Chinese family to be erased by modernization.

Rather, Confucian values remain strong, but flexible enough to fit the needs of a modern society.

# Endnotes

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26 These situations were observed while I lived in Taiwan from Dec. 1986 to April 1988. The names of the people mentioned are fictitious names.

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